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ABSTRACT

The "new" teaching of literature which is enjoyable and relevant to the lives of students, and which reflects the excitement of the teacher, should (1) make less use of anthologies, more use of paperbacks; (2) involve less common reading, more individualized reading; (3) use less adult literature, more good adolescent literature; (4) consist of less teaching about literature, more teaching of literature; (5) concentrate less on classical, antiseptic literature, more on modern--especially ethnic--literature; and (6) include the teaching of films as art forms. (MF)

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THE NEW LITERATURE?

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When I was told that the theme of our meeting was "The New English," I was somewhat bothered, mostly because I have never had the foggiest idea of what that term meant. Later, when I was told that I was to speak on "The New Literature," I was doubly overwhelmed since I have no idea what that term means, if indeed, it has any meaning. Hence, I would like to substitute the proper title for this improper speech--"What Is New About the New Literature, What Is New About the New Teaching of Literature, and What Is So New About All That?"

I would deny that there is anything like "new" literature, at least not in the same sense that there may be "new grammars" or that there might possibly be something "new" in the "new composition". I would argue that there's always been a new literature. What concerns me far more than the "newness" of literature is whether there is in Arizona schools a new teaching of literature, something related more to the mental set of the English teacher than to the particular literature he teaches or recommends. So my topic today is what I consider new teaching of literature to be, any time, any place.

Before I briefly sketch out what I consider some components of new teaching of literature, let me indicate some assumptions that are basic to my point of view about teaching literature.

1. Literature ought to be enjoyable to both teacher and students almost all the time on some level. The clichés that students learn to appreciate literature by reading far beyond their reading level or understanding and that students will someday appreciate great literature they cannot like now are just that--teaching clichés with little foundation and no verifiable proof.

2. Literature ought to have meaning to the lives of the readers, either from an immediate relevance to the students' needs and interests or from a relevance made clear by an exciting teacher.

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3. Literature should allow the students to meet the real world in the English classroom, not to retreat to an isolated sanctuary remote from the world. We have too often proved to students that there are two worlds--the real world and the world of the English class.

4. Literature must be understood and enjoyed by the teacher who must make every effort to let the class understand and see his enjoyment. The teacher must know the literature and his students well enough to bring the two together. One way to bring literature to the student is to be excited about it. It is almost a pedagogical original sin to keep our delight in literature so much to ourselves.

5. Literature should sometimes (though not always) be memorable and great literature, memorable and great because the teacher makes them so for a particular class, not because the literature is in any sense great or memorable in and of itself. The notion that "great" books remain "great" books for all time can be demolished by reading some of the titles selected by the Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English from 1894 to 1899 for use in secondary English classes. How many of you recognize the following books: LAST OF THE BARONS (Bulwer), PRUE AND I (Curtis), BELINDA (Edgeworth), CRANFORD (Gaskell), WESTWARD HO (Kingsley), RISE OF THE DUTCH REPUBLIC (Motley), RELIQUES (Percy), MARMION (Scott), VIEWS AFOOT (Taylor), or that greatest of all great books for the English class HOURS OF EXERCISE IN THE ALPS (Tyndall).

I believe that there are six ways in which I can spot an English teacher who is teaching literature in a new way.

First, new teaching of literature means less use of anthologies and more use of paperbacks. The anthology is usually defended on the grounds that it is economical, that it is safe from attack, and that it allows students to get a larger perspective of literature. Unfortunately, our educational system has frequently been accused of being anti-intellectual, and, a look at the typical literature anthology lends credence to the attack. Full of snippets from this or that and seldom containing any first class literary performance of any length, the anthology is so fearful of being controversial--and therefore alive--that it carefully avoids being anything but a kind of literary hash. Daniel Fader in HOOKED ON BOOKS: PROGRAM AND PROOF (NY: Berkeley, 1968, pp. 44-45) does a beautiful job on the anthology. Citing objections to the anthology for use with disadvantaged students, Fader really points out the objections to the anthology for any student.

> An acceptable text in this program is one which is not an anthology and does not have hard covers, for the hardbound text and the anthology have a number of serious defects in common. To the unsuccessful student both are symbols of a world of scholastic failure, and both to some degree are causes of that failure. No hardbound text was ever thrust into a child's pocket, and no anthology was ever 'read' in any meaningful sense of the word by anybody. . . The use of such an anthology testifies to a lack of effort or imagination, or both, on the part of the educator, and the surrender of inspiration to convenience. Furthermore, the anthology shares with all other large, hardcover books in the desk-top-and-locker disease which so often afflicts these less portable and digestible texts when they are given to poor and mediocre students. Such books were obviously not made to give companionship to immature students; recognizing this, these students usually give them the minimal attention they appear to deserve.
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> . . . Generations of students, nurtured solely on anthologized and authorized classics, have become the parents of children who, like their parents, lack the reading habit because the typical school program neither stimulates nor breeds a desire to read in the average student.

Many English teachers have turned to paperbacks because of the obvious literary disadvantages of the anthology. The values of paperbacks are many, most important perhaps being these: students do like paperbacks, and they will read them, sometimes being willing to read a paperback when they ignore that same book in hardbound form; paperbacks are inexpensive and there are so many titles in so many areas that teachers can no longer maintain that paperbacks are inherently shoddy or limited in appeal or unavailable; paperbacks allow the teacher to use complete works rather than the snippets available in anthologies; paperbacks allow the students to begin to build their personal libraries, something every English teacher wants--and how many students will really want to build a library of hardbound literary anthologies; and paperbacks work well with any number of approaches to literature--the Whole Book approach, Thematic Units, Genre study, or Free Reading Programs.

Second, new teaching of literature means less <u>common</u> reading of one work and more individualized reading programs. If the aim of the English teacher is to inculcate a love of reading in his students and he decides to stick to common reading, then he must perforce play God to select good books which will interest all his students, and any English teacher knows that any given book will bore some students, no matter how attractive it is to others. I would not argue that we

should abandon common reading entirely, but I would argue that Free Reading Programs mixed in with some common reading will make a far more attractive program in literature. The point of common reading is to allow both teacher and class to focus on one work and to analyze the literary qualities of that work. Free Reading Programs allow teacher and students to differentiate reading on the basis of needs and interests. Defined as a series of consecutive class periods, perhaps from three to five weeks long, in which students are given the opportunity to read many books, Free Reading has certain postulates:

1. The English teacher must know his students extremely well to be able to recommend books to each individual. Indeed, I have claimed that Free Reading demands that the English teacher know every book ever written and the kind of student for which this book might have value. Granting the hyperbole of this comment, it still has some truth, for the teacher must know both students and books to bring the two together.
2. The teacher must be committed to the belief that students can and will read better, will appreciate and will enjoy literature more if they are given the chance to read literature they might enjoy. Is it not strange that most English teachers preach the joy and virtue of reading, yet never read while the class reads, indeed but rarely allow any class time for reading for fun. Some teachers will maintain that they have Free Reading on Fridays, but one day a week allows no continuity to the reading, and too often, the reading is allowed while the teacher corrects papers or diagrams sentences, rarely reading himself.
3. The English teacher must have a supply of books readily available, either in hardback or paperback. Still, small schools with inadequate libraries have been able to run highly successful Free Reading Programs. The English teacher who explains that he cannot do Free Reading since he has few books at hand is not offering a rationale but a rationalization.
4. The English teacher will work, tactfully and quietly, to recommend better and better books to his students, but recommend is the word, not force. That implies that he knows books of all sorts and qualities and that he knows his students very well.
5. The English teacher will periodically discuss with his class certain key literary problems in terms of the books he knows and the books they are reading. Class discussions of literary techniques like point of view, character development, and the problem of time in plot structure where everyone in the class is reading different material do present problems, but the discussions are often more lively and perceptive since the discussions are based on materials students have enjoyed.

Third, new teaching of literature means less use of adult literature and more use of literature written specifically for young people, especially for younger students or poor readers or disadvantaged students. Objections can easily be made that much adolescent literature is badly written, but then there are many adult novels that are badly written, and there are some very bad--meaning inappropriate --classics which are jammed down students' throats. But English teachers who have read some of the many excellent books written for the adolescent know that quality is there if they look for it, and that all adolescent literature is not an exercise in wandering into a literary wasteland. Books like Susan Hinton's THE OUTSIDERS (Dell) with its picture of a sub-culture too few teachers know and too many students know full well, Nat Hentoff's JAZZ COUNTRY (Tempo) with its description of the world of Black jazz musicians and a young White boy trying desperately to find the door to their world, Mary Stolz' A LOVE, OR A SEASON (Tempo) with its perceptive description of the developing sexuality of a very nice girl, Frank Bonham's DURANGO STREET (Scholastic) with its accurate description of a street gang,

H.D. Francis' BIG SWAT (NAL) with its account of the pressures of big-time college football on both young athletes and coaches, Jack Bennett's THE HAWK ALONE (Bantam) with its account of one of the last of the great white African hunters, and Jean Merrill's THE PUSHCART WAR (Tempo) with its amusing and yet biting satire on the stupidities of man in a big city--all these prove that books written for young readers can have literary merit and adolescent appeal. English teachers can be snobs about adolescent literature, but only until they have read a fair sampling of these books. If they still dislike these books as a class and they have read a number of them, then these English teachers are not snobs--they are damn fools.

Fourth, new teaching of literature means less teaching about literature and more teaching of literature, whether in common reading or Free Reading. Less attention should be given to all the peripheral matters of literature, for example, historical backgrounds, biographies of writers, history of various genres, etc., unless that knowledge will demonstrably make the student understand the literature better. That background material can be helpful goes without saying, dependent upon the literature involved. That such material is always helpful is most doubtful. Too often, English teachers give lectures on the development of the Elizabethan Drama completely and hopelessly unrelated to any problems the students will encounter in reading HAMLET or MACBETH or JULIUS CAESAR, or these teachers give lengthy lectures on the History of Drama and leave no time to read more than one or two plays, or they talk of the History of the Continental Novel without any time to read more than one novel. Appreciation does not follow such information, only apathy at the best, detestation of literature at the worst. Appreciation of literature follows understanding; it does not precede it. I would suggest that one of the most beneficial practices for all colleges would be the required burning of all graduate papers and all seminar notes before graduate students began any teaching in the secondary school. Otherwise, in a moment of desperation, the teacher might be tempted to regurgitate his scholarly notes on HAMLET or THE BEAR or THE SCARLET LETTER to his unwilling students. Like Cassandra cursed with the gift of prophecy no one would believe, too many high school English teachers are cursed with the gift of total recall that no student wants to hear. But I do believe that we do need to give more attention to the problems of the literary performance. For example, in fiction we could spend some profitable time on matters applicable to most fiction--point of view, the problem of time in plot structure, and characterization. In poetry--tempo, metaphor, imagery, and symbol. These matters are basic to literature, not basic to just one piece of literature. Besides that, they are inherently exciting to the good teacher of English, and they can be made exciting to students.

Fifth, new teaching of literature means less teaching of classical, safe, and antiseptic literature, and more teaching of modern literature, especially ethnic literature. As English teachers, we need to face the real world young people face, not necessarily the world we might like to see, but the real world nonetheless. Wallace Stevens once wrote, "Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature." The world that young people face today is sometimes cruel and petty and unhappy and chaotic, but it is a real world, and it is one they had better learn to cope with. To believe that we can meet their lives and needs and interests through SILAS MARNER or IVANHOE or several other classics is a fallacy that hurts students little (it just bores them and turns them off), but it kills the case for literature in the eyes of young people. If we lead students to face reality by teaching books that someone might deem objectionable, we must accept the possibility that we may face the censor. If we teach or recommend the works of James Baldwin or John Knowles or George Orwell or Ralph Ellison or Norman Mailer or Lawrence Ferlinghetti or Gordon Parks or Warren Miller, the censor may visit us. But if we teach any

modern literature worthy of the name literature, the censor may visit us since he is likely to object to reality and any search for the truth which differs from his view of the world and truth. If we cowardly retreat and avoid modern literature or indeed any controversial literature, the censor may spare us and why, after all, should he attack us--indeed, no one is likely to disturb our ivory-tower quest for peace in a troubled world, for order in a chaotic universe. Our students will be only too happy to leave us alone, since we clearly will not have touched or disturbed or found them. Ethnic literature may cause problems, but our unwillingness to use Black literature, or the literature of any minority group, has often meant that too many students have turned us off completely. In a recent article in the ENGLISH JOURNAL ("What's Black and White and Read All Over?", September 1969, pp. 818-819), Dorothy Sterling makes an exciting case for the use of Black literature, but she also points out how little of Black literature has crept into secondary anthologies of literature.

> . . . I spent a week at the Teachers College Library in New York City and the Bureau of Cooperative Education Services in Westchester County, New York, examining all of the modern anthologies on their shelves. Perhaps this was not the most scientific way to conduct a survey, but hear my results. I read thirty-eight books from twelve leading publishers. All were published after the Supreme Court's decision of 1954. Most appeared in the sixties, some as recently as this year. Out of the thirty-eight, twenty-seven contained no material at all by or about American Negroes. The other eleven carried one or two selections apiece--Negro spirituals, James Bland's "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny"; two excerpts from biographies of George Washington Carver; two accounts of black athletes, one sketch of Harriet Tubman and one of Count Basie, and a story about a Negro cowboy. One book integrated its pages with exactly two sentences on Negro achievements. Another included a single poem by a black poet--on a religious theme.

Any literature worthy of the name always presents problems. Indeed, great literature is subversive by nature, since if its greatness touches you, you can never again be the same person, your ideas are not the same, your values are not the same, you are not the same.

Sixth, new teaching of literature means more use of films as literature, not films to replace literature or to be a handmaiden of literature, but rather films as art forms. If literature can be defined as an artistic attempt to make a statement about the condition of man as the author is given ability to see the truth about man and his world, then films can qualify as art forms deserving of attention in the English classroom. I do not mean films like "Our Friend, The Introductory Adverbial Clause," or "Visiting the Dusty Relics of Shakespeare for a Genuflection or Two," or "Wordsworth Country," or the Leslie Howard-Norma Shearer version of ROMEO AND JULIET. The film is very much a part of the students' world, and we can go into that world and live in that world since it is real, or we can retire into our safe and sanctified English class, safe from contamination by the world, safe from touching our students, safe from doing any more than paying lip service to literature, life, and our students. Short films like "The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," or "Moods of Surfing," or "Nahanni," or "Dream of Wild Horses," or "Adventures of an *," or "The Stringbean," or "No Reason to Stay," make statements that students can understand and appreciate, and these statements can stand by themselves, or they can be related to the real literature in the classroom. Feature-length films like THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER or TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE or LONELY ARE THE BRAVE, or ODD MAN OUT or THE 400 BLOWS have a legitimate place in the English classroom. More obviously, films made from drama

like Olivier's HENRY V or HAMLET surely make Shakespeare come out of the closet and into the world. One of the most exciting (if expensive) things an English teacher could do would be to read MACBETH with his students and then show three quite different filmed versions--Orson Welles' MACBETH, the very accurate and very, very dull version with Judith Anderson and Maurice Evans, and the magnificent stylized Japanese film THRONE OF BLOOD by Akira Kurosawa. As so many English teachers know today and as we read so often in MEDIA AND METHODS, films and film study are looming large as a significant part of the English classroom. The use of films may be long overdue, but at least it is coming.

These, then, are just a few ways in which I think I can spot the "new" teaching of literature. None of them are "new" enough to be called educational innovations. All of them are "old" enough to be established practices in many schools. That they should be implemented in English classes seems to me obvious; that they are often ignored by English teachers seems to me a cause for alarm. All of these six approaches will bring literature and reality to the students in the English classroom. That is sufficient justification for their use.